

Observations on British Butterflies in 1977

By Dr. C. J. LUCKENS*

It is in some ways indicative of my personal fortunes with the butterflies in 1977 that entomological expeditions in January and February proved to be among the most interesting and productive of the season.

The first outing of the year was on January 8th — a fine crisp day — when I went with my two elder sons to a Nature Reserve, near Selborne, to look for ova of *Thecla betulae* L. Somewhat to my surprise there were excellent numbers on the small blackthorns and Mr. Matthew Oates, the Warden, told me that the butterfly had been quite plentiful the previous August. Unfortunately a new track had been bulldozed right through one of the best areas outside the Reserve, but I found several ova on the remaining bushes, and brought away five for rearing at home.

The following week-end Dr. T. W. Tolman and I travelled up to the Bucks./Oxford border. Snow was lying on the high ground and it was cold work searching the blackthorns, but in just over two hours we each found about two dozen *betulae* ova, some of which we retained. The ova were spread all over the wood, but the younger clean looking bushes, not necessarily the smallest, seemed the most favoured.

We went on to a locality where *Strymonidia pruni* L. had been abundant the previous June, but disappointingly drew a complete blank for the well-camouflaged ova of this species. A wood on the Surrey/Sussex border was the locality I chose to search for ova of *Thecla quercus* L. on January 21st. One of twelve ova from here had produced an ab. *flavimaculatus* Lienard in 1976 and I hoped, vainly as it turned out, that another might turn up. It had taken me then over an hour to find the twelve ova, but this time I found 31 in under 50 minutes.

The exception to this rule of plenty was in a local wood where *betulae* had been fairly frequent (in the larval stage at least) in previous years, but where I could only find two ova after a prolonged search on January 29th. There is little natural regeneration of blackthorn evident in this wood, and possibly it is becoming gradually less and less suitable for *betulae*.

On February 5th, Mr. Harold Short and I went to a site near Dorchester where, on a group of Wych Elms, we found several of the interesting white-ringed eggs of *Strymonidia w-album* Knoch. Some of these had been deposited on branches which must have been in complete shade when the trees were in leaf. The Wych Elms looked reasonably healthy there, but as we travelled back eastwards, more and more evidence of Dutch elm disease became apparent. In our part of Hampshire the infection among elms is rampant.

When the ova from Dorset started to hatch in late February, I drove around looking for healthy Wych Elms in order to feed the young larvae and finally found two near

* 52 Thorold Road, Bitterne Park, Southampton, SO2 4JG.

Kings Somborne. To my surprise there were numerous *w-album* ova on the twigs I gathered, though I had no idea previously that the butterfly existed there (*vide Ent Rec.*, 89: 149). When I returned to release imagines in July, however, I saw only two free-flying *w-album* and found only one of the Wych Elms surviving, and that rather dubiously.

The first Brimstones of the year appeared on mild and sunny March 2nd — five along the road beside my house. The weather turned cold, but exactly a week later the same species was flying in the same place.

Towards the end of this generally cold month, on March 25th, I visited a local churchyard set in the woods, and to my surprise found a pair of *Vanessa atalanta* L. sporting in the hazy sun. In addition to these *Nymphalids*, which I suspect had hibernated somewhere in or around the church, there were also several Brimstones, Peacocks and a Comma. Chiff-chaffs were calling — spring had arrived — or so one could reasonably assume. April, however, turned out to be no mild month of sun and showers. It was cold and wet with a persistent north wind. I re-visited the Romsey wood on the 29th, a day of rather chilly sunshine, but there were several male *Celastrina argiolus* L. flitting around.

Under similar weather conditions two days later, the first *Pararge aegeria* L. were flying in the woods south of Salisbury. Whilst fishing near Bishopstoke that evening, I found larvae of *Panaxia dominula* L. common on Comfrey alongside the Itchen. Chilly weather continued well into May but there were plenty of *Pierids* about when the north east winds finally abated after the middle of the month. On May 20th I noticed one or two *Hamearis lucina* L. and *Erynnis tages* L. on a hillside near Selborne. The following day *lucina* was sparse at Westbury, but *Calophrys rubi* L. was common and there were a few *C. argiolus* and *Anthocharis cardamines* L. flying at the base of the down.

There then followed several good, warm days and on May 28th I set off for West Sussex. Operations commenced at Duncton Down, near Petworth, a favourite locality of mine in the past, but one I had not visited for several years. Here *Aricia agestis* D. & S. was numerous, and several *C. rubi* flitted around the hawthorns, but *H. lucina* was virtually non-existent, and I could only find two examples after a careful search.

I drove on to the woods near Plaistow where the spring brood of *Leptidea sinapis* L. was flying in numbers, along with a few *Pyrgus malvae* L., *C. rubi* and *Coenonympha pamphilus* L. *Boloria euphrosyne* L. was uncommon in all but one area, which had been recently cleared, and here there was welcome evidence of a revival of this small fritillary. The most exciting increase, however, was in the numbers of the engaging little day flying Hawk moth — *Hemaris fuciformis* L. I saw at least a dozen hovering over the bugle flowers, and they continued to fly right up to the time I left at about 4.30 p.m.

The fine weather continued right up to the next Saturday, when I took my two elder sons with me to the Midlands. It then became cloudy, with intermittent bright spells, but enough to encourage most butterflies to move. My main object was to look for *Carterocephalus palaemon* Pall, and though several widely scattered sites looked very promising, the Skipper did not show up in any of them. It is somehow even more depressing to morale when a locality looks right, but still does not produce the insect.

Such a state of affairs did not apply to a piece of downland near Winchester — St. Catherine's Down, recently taken over by the County Naturalist Trust. Here the reason for the lack of butterflies was not hard to discover. I found cattle were still grazing on June 7th, the downland flora decimated and only one *agestis*, where normally there would be numbers of that species along with other *Lycaenids*. In spite of my telephoning the next day and informing the official responsible for managing this Nature Reserve, the cattle were still there when I returned from France at the end of June, and another phone call revealed that the farmer had not even been contacted about the situation. When the livestock finally were removed the down had been ruined for Lepidoptera, for probably several seasons to come, the surviving butterflies being confined to a strip of fenced grassland by the path at one end of the hill.

A few sunny spells on June 10th tempted me to try another stretch of downland on the Hampshire border. Dull weather prevailed by the time I reached the locality, but there were still plenty of butterflies at rest in the grasses, including *Lysandra bellargus* Rott., *A. agestis*, *Polyommatus icarus* Rott., *C. pamphilus* and *P. malvae*. The same species were still flying there on June 30th, after nearly three weeks of generally appalling weather. A fresh confluent var. of *Zygaena trifolii* L. was taken during this visit.

I accompanied Mr. J. M. Chalmers-Hunt on July 8th to look for *Plebejus argus* f. *cretaceus* Tutt. in Kent. The first *Aphantopus hyperanthus* L. were about on a hillside near Eynsford, along with many fresh *Maniola jurtina* L., but no blues at all. We drove to Folkestone Warren in the afternoon where *P. icarus* was flying and a few *Thymelicus sylvestris* L., but there were no chalk-form *argus* to be found. I was pleased to be shown a few examples of a rare little moth *Aplasta ononaria* Fuessly which precariously holds on here, in one of its two known stations in Britain. Later on we inspected a sector of Blean Woods and saw a few fresh male *Mellicta aethalia* Rott. flitting rather sluggishly about the evening sun.

P. argus was out in strength on a New Forest heath near Beaulieu on July 15th. I netted scores for inspection, but no vars. came my way, and I pressed on to the area between Ladycross and Woodfidley, the former home of *Zygaena viciae anglicae* Reiss. No *Zygaenids* of any kind were seen, however, nor were there at this date any *Limenitis camilla* L. or *Argynnis paphia* L. in this sector of the forest. The first

T. quercus was flitting about the oaks. There were White Admirals flying in the Wiltshire woods later on that afternoon but still no *paphia* or *Apatura iris* L.

I did not encounter the latter butterfly until July 23rd when I returned to the Wiltshire woods in the late afternoon, having spent some time watching *Argynnis aglaia* L., *Melanargia galathea* L. and *Lysandra coridon* Poda on Stockbridge Down. On arrival at the wood I found *paphia* and *camilla* fully out, but much more scarce than usual. I saw two *iris* and one of them, a male, settled on the track. I was able to get within a yard of it, as it slowly fanned its wings and it appeared to be in mint condition.

Professional duties prevented me from doing any more entomologising until August 8th when we went on holiday to Dorset, again renting a cottage at Worth Matravers. With anticipation I rose early on August 9th in order to reach Portland in time for the "morning rise" of *coridon*. The numbers of this butterfly, however, were disappointingly low and *Eumenis semele* L. scarcer than usual. A few *P. argus* were on the wing, and some were still fairly fresh. I found a male of this species with greyish white replacing the usual black border on the forewings.

The weather stayed fine for the rest of that week, and most days I explored the local downland and coast. *C. argiolus* was common all along the path to the Winspit and above the beach was a large clump of ivy. Here I encountered Mr. K. Baskcomb who was watching the ovipositing females of this butterfly and we both found several of the pale turquoise ova at the base of the flower buds. *Thymelicus actaeon* Rott. was abundant at the Winspit and so was *M. galathea*, but *coridon* was represented by two or three males only. A very welcome sprinkling of *Lycaena phlaeas* L. also appeared on August 13th, and among them was a striated forewing var. in fair condition.

The other area I concentrated on was further east along the coast, involving a longish walk. As in previous years, this proved to be the best place for *coridon*, but even there the numbers were by no means spectacular. I could find no further examples of *P. argus* on this stretch of coast, incidentally (*vide Ent. Rec.* 89, p. 238).

Wet weather dominated our second week at Worth Matravers, but I doggedly set out most days to examine the *coridon* in the rain-soaked grass, and even though no abs. came my way, there was some satisfaction to be had from the exercise.

We returned on August 20th and a week later went to stay in Sussex. My wife and I walked over a favourite down near Lewes on the 27th and found fair numbers of *L. bellargus* on the wing. *Coridon* also was still fairly common and one or two *Vanessa cardui* L. were seen. This colourful migrant was common on the wild buddleia patch outside Winchester during the ensuing two weeks, and was accompanied by numerous *Nymphalis io* L., *Aglais urticae* L., *V. atalanta*, *Gonepteryx rhamni* L. and a few *Polygonia c-album* L.

The first week in September saw *C. argiolus* still flying and on the 9th *Hesperia comma* L. lingered in reasonably good condition on a down not far from Winchester. Our garden at this time was regularly patronised by good numbers of *atalanta*, and one or two welcome *cardui* and *c-album* also graced the buddleias and michaelmas daisies.

Autumn is a rather melancholy time for the butterfly enthusiast, especially after a disappointing year, but planning for the next season has its own excitements, and one hopes, eventual rewards.

OCURRENCE OF IMAGO OF *ORTHOZIA STABILIS* (D. & S.) IN MIDWINTER. — On the night of 17th/18th December, 1977, together with the usual midwinter species, a single specimen of *Orthozia stabilis* (Common Quaker) was caught in my m.v. trap at Ashurst, Hants. This species is normally on the wing in spring, and it is believed that the unusually mild weather of the early winter must have been responsible for this early emergence. — Dr. J. C. A. CRAIK, Department of Oceanography, The University, Southampton, SO9 5NH.

THE QUEEN OF SPAIN FRITILLARY (*ARGYNNIS LATHONIA* L.) IN 1976. — Further to my article "A Tale of Two Seasons" in *The Entomologist's Record*, Vol. 90, No. 1:18-19, I have heard from Mr. Henry Lee of Oslo who has seen hundreds of this species, and comments "it was undoubtedly a Queen of Spain". He refers to the typical zig-zag low down flight. I have also heard from Mr. K. J. Willmott who thinks it very likely; he had the most remarkable experience of finding a male feeding on marjoram on 12th July, 1976, when the butterfly was in mint condition, but en route to the same site in Surrey on the 19th, he found the same butterfly (photographically proved), a little rubbed but otherwise intact, feeding on marjoram a quarter of a mile away from the original spot (see his note in *Ent. Rec.*, 88:333). — A. ARCHER-LOCK, 5 Windsor Villas, Lockyer Street, Plymouth, Devon, PL2 2QD.

MYTHIMNA VITELLINA HBN. (THE DELICATE) NEW TO BERKSHIRE. — I was interested to read Dr. Kettlewell's note on this species in Oxfordshire in the February issue (*Ent. Rec.*, 90:53). As he states his first *vitellina* came to his trap on 22nd October, I thought readers would care to know that I also found a perfect dark male in my own trap here (map ref. sheet 175,858826), on the night of 2nd/3rd October. I believe this to be the first Berkshire record and I am, here, only about three miles from the Oxon. border. Actually the moth was resting above the m.v. bulb in the dome of the pyrex rain protector. It would seem that the species must have been widespread across the two counties that night. — T. J. G. HOMER, St. Timothee, Pinkneys Green, Maidenhead, SL6 6PA.